



Dilemmas of Deliberative Civic Education

Citation

Levinson, Meira. 2002. Dilemmas of Deliberative Civic Education. *Philosophy of Education Yearbook*, 262-270.

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:10861138>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

Dilemmas of Deliberative Civic Education

Meira Levinson
Boston Public Schools

Civic education is a primary aim of American schooling. Its general purpose is relatively uncontroversial: to educate children to participate in a democratic *polis*. But what kind of democracy is America—or should it be? In this paper, I will challenge the recently resurgent notion that deliberative democracy should be our civic goal. Although deliberative democracy may be extremely attractive as an ideal theory, there are serious costs to helping all children, especially those who grow up in racially, economically, or religiously segregated minority communities, to develop the skills for deliberation in a political context, and these costs may outweigh deliberative democracy's putative benefits over adversarial democracy.

THE CHALLENGE OF DELIBERATIVE EQUALITY

Many theorists have recently advocated deliberative democracy as being both superior to adversarial democracy and desirable in and of itself. For simplicity's sake, I will focus on David Miller's recent work about deliberative democracy to set the stage, as his book *Citizenship and National Identity* does a good job of setting out the aspirations of most deliberative democrats. Deliberative democracy promotes a process by which politics proceeds "through an open and uncoerced discussion of the issue at stake with the aim of arriving at an agreed judgement."¹ This is in contrast to what Miller terms liberal adversarial democracy, which aims merely at a "fair and efficient" aggregation of preferences (*CNI*, 9). In adversarial democracy, people give reasons to support their position and convert people to their side, but they also try to win adherents by bargaining, airing attack ads, making alliances, and so forth. In deliberative democracy, on the other hand, people give and listen to reasons in order to reach a consensus; alliances and bargains are not made because decisions are not made through majority voting but through deliberation and compromise until all members of the deliberative body agree. Deliberative democracy thus has many attractive elements: it fosters cooperation and mutual understanding rather than winning and losing (as adversarial democracy seems to); it purports to give all citizens a "voice" rather than just the most powerful or the most numerous (as tends to occur in majoritarian democracy); and it encourages citizens to make decisions based on "public reasons" that can be supported through deliberation rather than on individual prejudices that thrive in the privacy of the voting booth.

Miller points out that certain social and political conditions need to apply if deliberative democracy is to live up to its promise. Crucially, the *ability* (as opposed to merely the right) of all groups to participate equally is central to deliberative democracy's rationality and legitimacy:

Deliberative democracy may be formally inclusive, in the sense that everyone is permitted to enter and speak in democratic forums, but if the debate by its very nature favors some groups at the expense of others, it is not inclusive in a substantive sense. Similarly if the reasons that prove to count in deliberative settings are not reasons for everyone, but only

reasons for particular groups or coalitions of groups, then the outcome cannot be described as rational in a sense that transcends group membership. If the rationality claim falls, so does the legitimacy claim, for why should the disadvantaged groups accept as legitimate a procedure that relies upon methods of argument and reasons that they cannot share (*CNI*, 144)?

As a result, it is essential that deliberative democracy enables members of all groups to participate on an equal basis, not only in the sense of their simply being present at the discussions, but also in the sense of their speaking out, being listened to and understood, and influencing the debate where appropriate.

There have been many objections to deliberative democracy that focus on the first two issues: inclusion of multiple voices and appropriate recognition of their contributions to the deliberation. Iris Marion Young, especially, has raised important questions about minorities' membership in deliberative political bodies and their comfort in speaking up even when they are included. What I want to consider, however, are issues of *influence*: even if minorities *participate* in deliberation, are they actually listened to and understood, and do they thereby actually influence the debate where appropriate? Frequently the answer is no. The reasons for this, I believe, say a lot about the continued weakness, and potential illegitimacy, of the deliberative democratic model.

There are three reasons that equal participation in deliberative bodies, even when coupled with the best of intentions and good will by all participants, may nonetheless result in unequal and inappropriate disjunctions in influence on the deliberative process. These reasons include: incorrect perceptions of minority "extremism" by members of majority groups, blindness to the ways that norms may operate invisibly in majority settings but suddenly seem off-putting or "sectarian" when they are made visible in minority settings, and the well-intentioned but disempowering attempt of individuals to reinterpret what others say in order to make it seem "reasonable." I will address these one at a time.

MINORITY "EXTREMISM"

One reason that equal participation does not necessarily translate to equal appropriate consideration within a deliberative setting is that minority groups may have such different experiences from the majority group that they come to understand how the world works in a way that is significantly different from, and even incomprehensible to, members of the advantaged majority. As a result, a member from the minority group may put forth arguments within a political debate that rest on premises about the world that are generally accepted by all of the other members of his group but are rejected as bizarre or crazy by the majority of the deliberative body. In this case, the deliberation is unlikely to be substantively inclusive, and therefore unlikely to be legitimate from the minority group's point of view.

It is important to emphasize that this problem may arise even when the claims that the minority group make appeal to common interests and norms held by all citizens. For example, many American blacks are extremely suspicious of U.S. health care policy as a result of revelations that for over fifty years, the federal government sponsored doctors to observe but not treat syphilitic black men in the

now-infamous Tuskegee study. This lack of trust has led to suspicion within the black community of state-mandated childhood immunizations and of the antiretroviral drug “cocktails” now used to combat HIV and AIDS.² Some black Americans also believe that the CIA developed and spread AIDS in inner cities and Africa, that they sold crack cocaine in the inner cities in the 1980s, that prominent black politicians are inevitable assassination targets, and that the American law enforcement and justice system are inherently racist (think O.J. Simpson).³

These examples remind us, I hope, of the crucial disparities in how many blacks and whites in America experience and interpret American life. It is unlikely that blacks and whites disagree about the desirability of good quality low-cost health care, of improving the prospects for terminally ill patients by developing new drugs, of free and open elections, or of proper channels for procedural and substantive justice. But blacks who subscribe to the beliefs related above may have surprising—or even crazy—things to say as far as most whites are concerned about public policies in these areas. (Blacks are unlikely to be as surprised at white perspectives on these matters, since majority perspectives are better expressed in the media.) Assuming that, consistent with their representation in the population, whites would make up the majority of deliberative institutions, therefore, they may end up consistently rejecting blacks’ contributions to the debate as irrelevant or unsupportable—despite every intention to foster a mutually respectful deliberative forum that is focused on finding common solutions rather than “winning.”

It may be too quick to say that blacks’ impotence in influencing debate under such conditions is the fault of deliberative democracy. It may simply be up to black Americans to make the case to white Americans that their understanding of the “facts on the ground” is true, as they have in regard to “Driving While Black” and racial profiling. After all, white Americans have no reason to accept the idea that there are sinister government forces targeting politically powerful blacks just because many black Americans think this is true. In the meantime, however, it strikes me as being very unlikely that blacks, who make up twelve to thirteen percent of the American population, should necessarily accept the rationality and legitimacy of the deliberative democratic process, and of the political decisions that are made prior to white America’s acceptance of black America’s descriptions of its experiences. Furthermore, to the extent that similar disconnects could be found between women and men, religious minorities and Christians, gays and straights, and poor people versus wealthy people, deliberative democracy becomes increasingly untenable.

UNACKNOWLEDGED NORMS AND “SECTARIAN” REASONS

A second reason that minority groups may end up having an inappropriately small effect on deliberation despite having representatives who appropriately voice their concerns and ideas is that members of the majority group may live by certain norms, or benefit from experiences of the world, that they deny when these are articulated by members of minority communities. For example, studies of identity development in the United States have shown that white children are the only ones who generally do not use race to describe themselves.⁴ It is clearly a white privilege to see oneself as not having a race, or as not being even partially defined by race. But

this differential experience of race is very hard for whites to acknowledge. Thus, in response to a black person's invocation of race in a political debate, whites in America (and I expect in many other countries) will often complain, privately at least, "Why do blacks talk about race all the time?" They have listened to the black person's reason or idea, but they do not "hear" it or allow it to influence them appropriately, despite having the best of intentions, because of their inability to acknowledge that their own experiences have been shaped by race—but in their case by the privilege of white race.

This problem is not confined to race. In *Citizenship and National Identity*, Miller discusses the case of a Muslim parent who tries to argue in favor of the establishment of Muslim schools. In his example, the parent starts out by saying that "it is vitally important that a child's religious background be supported by his or her school," but this argument gets nowhere as "many people held precisely the opposite opinion." The parent thus switches to arguing that "Muslim children would in many cases not flourish academically unless they were sent to schools where the teaching reflected their cultural values," which invokes the more acceptable norm of the "principle of equal opportunity," and which therefore ends up (possibly) being successful. Miller concludes from this:

the search for agreement will itself act as a filter on the kinds of reason that prevail in the discussion, sectarian reasons being weeded out precisely because it becomes apparent to their supporters that they are not going to command wide assent (*CNI*, 151).

In other words, Miller interprets the Muslim parent's arguments as representing a movement from unpalatable sectarian values to desirable common norms.

I suggest, however, that the Muslim parent drew on common norms in both cases, but in response to the first argument the presumably Christian majority weeded out a norm to which they unknowingly subscribe in practice and benefit from themselves, but are unwilling or unable to acknowledge. In other words, a norm that was so well-entrenched as to be invisible in the British mainstream, Christian context became "sectarian" as soon as it was applied in a non-mainstream (for example, Muslim) context. After all, most British school children do have their religious background supported by their schools, which offer religious education as part of the national curriculum, as well as religious school assemblies and holidays. But because they are in the majority, and because British Christianity is generally mushy, Christian parents in Britain do not think about the fact that their child daily benefits from the application of the first norm in their schools. They do not have to subscribe to it consciously, and even have the luxury of consciously rejecting it in non-Christian contexts as inappropriately "sectarian," because the Christian state educational establishment already subscribes to the same norm for them, much to their children's benefit.

Again, it is possible that in a properly respectful deliberative setting, these unacknowledged norms and experiences will be exposed and understood by all participants because whites and Christians would feel comfortable articulating their complaints and questions ("Why are you always obsessed with race?" "Why do you have to put religion into everything?") and blacks and non-Christians would feel

comfortable answering them. If so, then blacks' claims about the importance of affirming individuals' racial identity and Muslim's claims about the importance of schools' supporting children's religious background would likely be "heard" as well as listened to. But there is a question as to how ideal we can envision deliberative democratic institutions as being without our losing purchase on positive, applicable political theory and action. Even in a solution-oriented (rather than victory-oriented) setting in which people interacted according to principles of mutual respect, it may be too much to hope that participants will expend the time and energy to engage in what is an inevitably slow and painful process of self-discovery. As a result, I suggest that often, even in a mutually respectful deliberative setting, it is likely that whites/members of majority groups will shy away from claims that seem too racially focused or self-segregating. They will listen to but then reject them, and these reasons may therefore wrongly—and illegitimately, from minority groups' perspectives—not gain purchase on future deliberations.

"WHAT YOU REALLY MEAN TO SAY IS..."

A third way in which minorities' influence on democratic deliberation may be illegitimately limited is by members of the majority group's unintentionally but pervasively reinterpreting what minorities say in order to make minorities' claims make sense to them. This may be done unconsciously, or may be done as a misguided extension of respect—they may think that by saying or thinking, "What you're really trying to say is..." they are doing a service to the minority group. Miller himself provides an example of this, I believe, in the following comment:

If we take, not militant Islam...but Islamic religious identity of the more usual kind, it is perfectly possible for a Christian to value this identity while holding to Christian values. There is likely to be sufficient overlap in the virtues embodied in the two ways of life for the Christian to endorse the Muslim identity, even while recognizing that this is not an identity he or she would wish to embrace (*CNI*, 74).

This claim misses the point, I think, about what it means to value other cultures (and highlights the difficulty of really "hearing" the claims made by members of other cultures). Valuing the overlaps between one's own culture and somebody else's means that one simply values other cultures to the extent that they replicate or mirror one's own (with sufficient, "open-minded" discount for superficial differences). For an individual's "concerns, interests, and convictions" really to count in and appropriately influence deliberation, the *differences* between his position and others' must be recognized and taken into account; otherwise, he might as well not participate (*CNI*, 146). Similarly, efforts to rephrase a person's position ("What she's really trying to say is...") often have the outcome, whether intended or not, of neutralizing her claims; in the process of rephrasing, the "weight of reasons" often is shifted to fit comfortably into the other discussants' already-present understanding of the matter at hand, rather than forcing people to grapple with an idea that is new or challenging (*CNI*, 146). As a result, dissenting individuals, especially if they come to an issue as outsiders whose views and experiences are different from the mainstream, run the risk of having their positions seemingly assimilated into the deliberations without their actually exerting influence in the appropriate way.

DELIBERATIVE CIVIC EDUCATION AND THE “LANGUAGE OF POWER”

Even within well-designed and well-intentioned deliberative contexts, therefore, the differential experiences of majority and minority group members can result in a loss of deliberative equality, and thus in a delegitimizing of deliberative democracy itself. If deliberative democracy nonetheless remains a civic goal then civic education must be structured so as to overcome these liabilities as much as possible. How it might do so is the focus of this section.

The goal of deliberative civic educators of majority-group students should clearly be to help members of majority groups “hear” the claims of minority co-deliberators without automatically rejecting them as “extreme” or “sectarian” or rephrasing them to fit more familiar beliefs and experience. This is hard. “Hearing” the claims made by people who seem very different from us requires a real exercise of thoughtful imagination combined with complex historical knowledge and understanding, and as those of us who teach know, it is extremely difficult to help students reach this point.

On the other side, minorities can make themselves more comprehensible to majorities by adopting the language of the majority in setting forth their claims. Teachers of members of minority groups, therefore, should teach students how to express themselves in terms that others will naturally understand. To put it baldly, in every country and in every community, there is a language of power, and if one wants to be effective through political dialogue, one must master and use that language.⁵ For members of the majority group(s) (whether these are based on class, race, religion, ethnicity, other features, or some combination), this language is usually easy to master because it is their own language. It is spoken at home, reinforced in the books they read, and repeated in the TV and movies they watch. Members of disadvantaged groups, however, have to learn to express themselves in language that makes sense to the majority group—in the language of power—and this may require minorities to shift their grammar, vocabulary, and narrative or expository form, as well as their cultural, political, and experiential referents in order to be understood and respected. When members of minority or disadvantaged groups do not make this switch, then it is easy for even well-intentioned majorities to reject them or just not to take them as seriously as they should in public discussion or debate. If they are able to make this switch, however, then they may be able to reduce or eliminate one of the barriers to effective cross-cultural communication.

To teach minority students to speak and use a “language of power” that is not intrinsically their own is, however, problematic. I suggest that there are at least five difficulties posed by this conception of civic education.

First, from both a pedagogical and a more broadly civic standpoint, it is obviously extremely troubling to teach citizens (or future citizens) that they are “outsiders” of a civic community. The school’s goal, of course, is to teach minority children (and others as well) that they are all civic beings who can and should function like “insiders” in deliberative settings (that is, they should join, speak up, vote). In order to teach them to function *effectively* as insiders in the deliberative process, however, the school must simultaneously teach minority students that they

are “outsiders” in the sense of having to learn and use a “language of power” that is initially not their own. This places the school in a bind—as it places the country in a bind. It runs the real risk of reinforcing many students’ already-strong sense of being excluded or discriminated against.

In addition, it is likely to be harder to build the kind of trust that deliberative democrats correctly argue is required for deliberative democracy to function effectively and justly, since minorities will be consistently aware of working in a world that is partly not their own. Furthermore, this model of civic education implicates the school (and almost always the state school, since most minority and disadvantaged children attend state schools) in partially interpreting the relationship between personal identity and civic identity. In some sense, the school at least temporarily “fixes” what a minority student’s identity means in the civic context by stressing the knowledge and skills particular to minority membership in a deliberative democracy. Thus, black students are consciously and intentionally introduced to a civic education curriculum different from that taught to white students, and within that curriculum they are explicitly taught that *as blacks*, they must develop particular skills in order to be successful *as citizens*. Both of these outcomes are probably undesirable—but they are also necessary components of civic education, I argue, if minority children are to learn how to participate most effectively in deliberative political institutions.

Two additional problems with this conception of civic education are unrelated to “outsider” vs. “insider” status. One of these is the problem of translation. Merely learning the language of power does not mean that every good idea can necessarily be expressed within it. This may be especially clear if we consider the cultural, political, and social referents implicit within majority dialogue. A religious conservative, for example, may be against pornography for religious reasons but know that these reasons will not be “heard” by a secularly oriented majority. She may choose, therefore, to translate her arguments into secular terms—arguing not that pornography desecrates God’s sacred vessel, for example, but that it promotes violence against women. While this act of translation may allow her to promote her ultimate goal of banning pornography, however, it also distorts her position in the meantime. Furthermore, in contrast to the notion that deliberative democracy promotes mutual communication and understanding, this woman is virtually reduced to lying to her fellow citizens; she is promoting an action based on reasons to which she does not necessarily subscribe, and cannot give the reasons in which she truly believes. Members of other minority groups—blacks, the poor, gays, recent immigrants—may feel the same way in other situations. Thus, teaching students to translate their ideas, thoughts, and concerns into language that members of mainstream groups will understand does not guarantee that they will feel free and able to express themselves honestly and openly, free of distortion.

Finally, learning the language of power may in some, even many, cases extract the ultimate cost of permanently altering students’ personal identities. Short-term accommodations, made over and over again, can have transformative long-term consequences in the form of assimilation and loss of original language. Being

effective in a deliberative setting in many ways is a function of “fitting in,” of seeming reasonable rather than radical, an insider rather than an outsider. To what extent can we expect individuals to fit themselves into mainstream dialogue, repeatedly and completely, without expecting that they will eventually fit permanently into the mainstream—that they will assimilate? If this is a goal of American civic education—and it certainly has been one historically—then well and good; there would be no problem with this model of civic education for a deliberative democracy. But if assimilation into the mainstream is not an explicit goal of civic education today, then we may be led to question a model of civic participation—that of deliberative rather than adversarial democracy—that requires so many individuals to shed their own languages, their own experiences, their own cultural or social referents, at the door of the polis.

One possible response to these problems is to abandon a deliberative model of democracy for a different democratic model—probably adversarial democracy. Insofar as adversarial democracy requires that individuals master the technologies of power—building alliances, gaining media exposure, lobbying effectively, and voting strategically—rather than the language of power, it would enable a form of civic education that might be less problematic than what I have described so far. But it is clear that adversarial democracy does not solve everything. After all, many of these pedagogical dilemmas arise for teachers (including myself), teaching in the context of adversarial democracy, not just for teachers educating for deliberative democracy.

Hence, a number of questions still remain: Can democracy be shaped in such a way as to be fully inclusive of and responsive to all members of society? Is there a form of civic education (and correlatively, a sense of civic identity) that can enable all students (and all citizens) to be responsive and responsible democratic citizens? Even if minority children do have to learn to think of themselves as partial outsiders in order to improve their capacity to function as insiders in civic life, can this be taught in a way that does not alienate them from civic life altogether? I do not know the answers to these questions—they are some of the reasons that it remains interesting to be a teacher. But I hope that the answers to these questions are (or can become) “yes,” for the sake of the unity of the country, and because we want all future citizens ultimately to view citizenship positively, as an opportunity to participate in political deliberation and to enact positive political change. These are dilemmas in such quasi-liberal states as America today, and they would be dilemmas in the deliberative democracies of tomorrow, as well.

1. David Miller, *Citizenship and National Identity* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2000), 9. This book will be cited as *CNI* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. See M.E. Guinan, “Black Communities’ Belief in ‘AIDS as Genocide’: A Barrier to Overcome for HIV Prevention,” *Annals of Epidemiology* 3, no. 2 (March 1993): 193-95; S.B. Thomas and S.C. Quinn, “The Tuskegee Syphilis Study, 1932 to 1972: Implications for HIV Education and AIDS Risk Programs in the Black Community,” *American Journal of Public Health* 81, no. 11 (November 1991): 1498-1505; and K. Siegel, D. Karus, and E.W. Schrimshaw, “Racial Differences in Attitudes Toward Protease Inhibitors Among Older HIV-Infected Men,” *AIDS Care* 12, no. 4 (Aug 2000): 423-34.

3. An excellent website, essentially structured as an annotated bibliography, that details the history and media coverage of black American's suspicions about connections between the CIA and drugs is "Central Intelligence Agency, 1995-2000: San Jose *Mercury News*, "Nicaraguans, Crack, and the CIA," <http://intellit.muskingum.edu/intellisite/cia1990s_folder/cia1995-96crack.html>. See also "Nation of Islam Investigates Possible CIA Crack Connection," (CNN, Oct. 13, 1996) <www.cnn.com/US/9610/13/farrakhan/>. Kathleen Koch, "CIA Disavows Crack Connection; Many Skeptical," (CNN, Oct. 23, 1996) <www.cnn.com/US/9610/23/cia.crack/> and Daniel Brandt and Steve Badrich, "Pipe Dreams: the CIA, Drugs, and the Media" <www.pir.org/news16.html>.

4. Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (New York: Basic Books, 1997). For a partially dissenting view, see Marguerite A. Wright, *I'm Chocolate; You're Vanilla: Raising Healthy Black and Biracial Children in a Race-Conscious World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

5. I am indebted here and in the discussion that follows to Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children* (New York: The New Press, 1995).